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ABSTRACT

This keynote address to the Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children consists of an overview of problems of contemporary life that represent challenges for family life and the nurturance of children. The family is seen as the place where the child learns what it means to be a human being. Implications of this concept are indicated. Global recommendations for child care providers are given. (Author/RH)

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ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY:

REDISCOVERING THE KEYS TO HUMAN SURVIVAL

by

Kathryn E. Nelson

1979 Midwest Early Childhood Conference

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We've come together here to celebrate childhood and the miracle of growth and development in which we all are privileged to participate. We are gathered here to promote our own learning, so that we may be more effective as we pursue our own calling. We are parents, teachers, teacher educators, pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists, administrators, child advocates. We are those who care about children and their families. In this International Year of the Child we carry on with our usual concerns, and that is searching for better techniques for supporting growth and development. Because we are gathered here, a diverse group, our concerns cover a whole range of interests. They range from new recipes for playdough to the task of improving our communities as an environment for children; from more effective storage areas in our schools to the development of national policies for children and families. We care about children--those for whom we have direct responsibility--but more than this we care for children all over the globe, for we recognize that the future of the world is already being shaped as we participate in the socialization of those who will shortly be in the position of decision makers.

Our concerns become macro as we focus our attention on just what it is we are telling children about what life is all about--what we are modeling for them as acceptable behavior; how we are helping them to develop values and moral standards. All we have to do is spend a few minutes in front of a television set, or a few minutes reading our newspapers to get a fairly clear message that all is not well with us. The family, that crucible in which human beings receive their first impressions of what it means to be a human being, has become another of our institutions undergoing the stress of rapid change.

I have developed an enemies list. The interesting thing about my enemies list is that these enemies of family life are often not things that in themselves are evil. They are indeed things that are good but have on occasion gotten out of proportion. Let me run through some of my enemies list, if you will.

One of the things that has plagued the family, and this is not new, is the whole business of rapid social change. Society has always changed and always will, but the rate of change has accelerated so that it is very hard for us to keep up, even with what is passé, let alone with what is current.

We are mobile people now; the world is our roaming place. But in moving from place to place often we suffer loss of continuity, a loneliness, and a sense of disconnectedness.

Another enemy is our refusal to mature. My daughter spent a great deal of time on me this evening, trying to make me look ten years younger. None of us will be old; like Peter Pan, we won't grow up. There is a youth orientation. Youth is valued. We must be "with it." We must be forever young. We must be free. It's done something to the leadership role, to the sage of age, to the wisdom that comes with having lived, because none of us is admitting to anything.

There's another kind of feeling abroad and you see it and feel it and live with it. It is a kind of growing sense of disenchantment. There's nothing to believe in really--no present, no future, no nothing. There's a kind of paranoia and it even hit us. I read in the paper that there were those persons who were feeling a sense that somehow we come together for some devious purposes and that we were going to subvert the influence of the family in some weird way. There's a sense that they are manipulating us. They're out there--it's big business, it's big government, it's minorities, it's majorities--a feeling of somehow being helpless, a feeling of somehow being hopeless.

A part of our long-lived immaturity is expressed in a preoccupation with self. We probably spend more time these days in self-fulfillment, self-searching, self-aggrandizement, self-polishing, self-fixing, self-realization. A tremendous preoccupation with our own personal success, and even when we gather together in families it gets passed on because it means that; because we are so preoccupied we spread that self just a little bit larger. And it means that my kid's got to be smarter than everybody else's kids, taller, walk more quickly, be sharper, be the best. As a result we put an intolerable amount of pressure for achievement on our children.

On occasion we find ourselves looking at what started out to be perfectly good public policies that have somehow turned and do something different than they started out to do. Juvenile courts--we started out with a good thing and we begin as we look at the functioning of those courts today to have some questions. Child labor laws, protective custody--we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that often the very structures that we set up to save people, to promote their welfare, separates them from meaningful

relationships in their lives.

Further, we suffer from an identity crisis, and we ask what does it really mean to be a man in today's world? What does it mean to be a woman? And we play the games that always get played in identity crises. Men are better than women. Women are better than men. And we are all losers.

We have developed separate patterns of social life for different age groups. It's amazing to me that now it's almost impossible to have a group that has nine year olds and eleven year olds in it, because their interests are so different.

We see a decline in respect for parenthood. In fact, I meet many women who somehow are a little bit shamefaced about the fact that they don't do anything but raise children, which in my book is one of the most marvelous things that anybody could possibly do. But there are those friends who say: "What are you doing? Oh, you are only....Nothing but a...."

We are NOW people. Pleasure now--no waiting. No pain. No suffering. No struggle. And if you begin to feel a little bit of pain take a pill, take a drink, take a shot, take a snort--escape. It has become a major theme in our society.

We've developed a throwaway culture. We throw away kleenex, we throw away cars and we discard relationships with the same ease. We smile and say, "Nothing lasts forever, you know. Besides, the new model will be better."

We sense sometimes that our world is coming apart. There's atomic energy, overpopulation, and the threat of total annihilation hinging on some conversations somewhere in some room that we are not sure what they're saying, or what they're planning, or what they're plotting. There's inflation, there's the energy shortage and the fact that we have come to the end of a period of expansion. We have come to the end of an era in which everything must be bigger in order to be better. We've come to a change in relational structures.

We are suffering a crisis of authority. We've begun to feel and to express ourselves that nobody should have any power over anybody. So now there's little authority for parents, there's no authority for schools,

and much too often no respect for each other. And this crisis gets expressed in vandalism, in casual shoplifting, in assaults on teachers, and other things that we see in our papers.

We are a "do your own thing" culture. What I want and what I need are what's important. We hear over and over again, "I can do whatever I want to, as long as I don't hurt anyone else." But are we not members of one another? If we cut off the hand, do we not indeed wound the body?

We pretend to be a nation of laws and yet somewhere abroad there's a feeling that our laws oppress us. We've set aside our religious values so often in fact it's very hard to find a clear statement of values. For too many of us there's nothing to be for and nothing to be against.

Now the family, which is where all social interaction begins, has never been that stable, unchanging entity that some would simplistically describe. It has always had to change in response to the era in which it found itself. In medieval times, the child was openly viewed as chattel and the family consisted of mother and father and children under eight. As soon as children were able to control their sphincters, to feed themselves, to dress and undress themselves, and to be responsible for avoiding dangers they became working members of the household. They were placed in the field and in shops and the teacher was the field boss or the master artisan with whom the child was apprenticed. The adult instructor and the boss now took over the parental role vis-a-vis authority. And the responsibility was given for the child's behavior, for opportunities and for work. In those days so many children died from infection and pestilence and the survivors left the immediate family and sent the young ones out to work. Only half of the children of those days reached youth. Adolescent conflicts and generation gaps didn't exist in those days in the form that we know them. During the Industrial Revolution, there was a change in the concept parenthood. Children stayed with parents beyond the ages of six to eight and parents came to be in a position of being advocates for their children. Continuity was provided for through institutions and traditions and was reflected in church institutions and other organizations. There were then organized places away from home for the learning, socialization and development of a sense of self and of group

identity. Parents began to delegate to others their authority to instruct, to guide, to nurture, to stimulate and to protect their children. Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, public school -- all come to supplement the shaping influence of the family. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, parents were thrust into the role of caretaker and advocates for their children over a longer period of time. There was another enduring influence: improved nutrition, the prevention of infectious disease, cures for some diseases, decreased infant mortality, and the expectation of longevity more than doubled over the past hundred years. Chance was no longer in control. Parents provided nutrition, immunization, sanitation, medical care to assure longer life for their children. Dependency was extended and increased in complexity.

We have now come to another whole series of challenges for family life. Today we must not cry for the past. Our task is rather to assess where we are, who we are, and what we want, really want, for ourselves and for our posterity. The question is: Are we able to organize ourselves around the challenge of our times? Some years ago Dr. Margaret Mead wrote, in speaking of our children that our children need the strength to bear the strange, the unknown, the peculiar and she was asked to comment on this statement and she replied: "Children need the ability to nest in the gale. We cannot tell where our children are going or what they may have to face --earthquake, war, plague, death of their parents, the destruction of everyone they know and love. All we can do is to prepare our children with sufficient strength and love so that they can come through the vicissitudes that life may have in store for them." Indeed one of the purposes of this meeting is to come together to prepare ourselves for that task. For the task of preparing our children for the strange and for the unknown.

Somehow I had a hard time putting these thoughts down on paper and they followed me everywhere I went and I felt that my message was going to sound like a message of doom and gloom. Indeed, I am only trying to express what I am seeing and feeling, and express at the same time the hope that I feel. There are some things that we, as people who care about children, must do. We must recommit ourselves to the difficult

task of people-making. Indeed, we must rediscover the family as the place where the child learns what it means to be a human being. We must use every skill that we possess to heal our social ills: poverty, alienation, lack of trust, lack of direction. Those of us who care about children must join hands to support the development of family life. We must develop new structures, for indeed families are changing. We must develop artificially extended families, support groups where families can come together to find support and strength, new structures to break down loneliness and hopelessness. We must better educate ourselves in the task of child rearing in formal ways and in informal ways. We must take the time to sort out what it is that's really good for us and for our children, to sort out our priorities. We must look at our own communities and ask the question, "Is this a good place, a healthy place for children to grow?" And having found the answer we must act. We must rediscover connectedness, our wholeness. We must indeed dare to believe in the future, not a future of ease and ever growing wealth, but a future in which human beings rediscover the beauty and the joy of human relationships. This is the International Year of the Child. It is a year of celebration of children, a year of celebration of life, of hope, of love, or it is a celebration of nothing at all. It must be a celebration of our communities joining hands. Those who have children of their own and those who have no children joining hands and feeling a sense of commitment to the children in our community, so that as we join hands we create an atmosphere in which children can discover themselves, discover the beauty of life, discover love. This is indeed a year of celebration. Let us as we spend these next few days together think about the work that we do in terms of what does my work mean in terms of the development of family life. We have learned, many of us to focus on what it means to create a lovely environment for children. We have, many of us, learned a good deal about supporting children's learning. We know a good deal about the kinds of experiences that help children to develop cognitively. We must spend the same kind of energy in trying to find out the kinds of things that will help parents to appreciate their role, the kinds of things that will help parents to appreciate themselves and their activities on behalf of their children.

I've always had the feeling that an occupational disease for those of us who worked in early childhood education was that, in many ways, we found ourselves terribly superior to parents because, after all, we knew so much about children and they knew so little. Indeed, if that is true we have an extra, super responsibility--a responsibility for lifting up parents and their children so that they can feel our strength, so that they can share our knowledge and better serve their children. Our children are our present and our future. In this year, the International Year of the Child, we celebrate. Let us as we come together celebrate life. Thank you.